

Star Wars

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Faded Colors

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There are several forces working at any given time in the Cularin system. Many struggle for the good of all, from the Tarasin that live in harmony with the Force to the many heroes that keep life safe for all the system's sentient inhabitants. The remaining Jedi of Almas work side by side with scoundrels and rogues to ward off the seemingly endless threats to peace and security throughout Cularin. Politicians and scientists, fringe workers and mysterious adepts - - all are united toward a common goal: survival.

But despite the best efforts of Cularin's saviors, some threats cannot be intercepted or even foreseen before they strike. The system's heroes have every reason to be proud of their accomplishments, but sometimes pride - - as they say - - goeth before the fall...

It was a long way from the jungle path to the front steps of the Training Hall, but it was a walk Barnab Chistor knew very well. He had been making this trek four times a week since being inducted into the service of the Master in Violet. A mysterious woman with eyes like an autumn sunset, he'd been powerless to refuse her invitation to join her classes at the martial complex of the Five Masters.

In truth, studying under the Master in Violet had been the best thing to happen to him, and he knew it. Not only was he in a better physical condition than he had ever known possible, her meditation techniques had helped him with his administration work for Gadrin. His city was healthy, he was healthy, and his love life...

Barnab blushed at the fleeting thought, images of the Master in Violet always flashing through his mind whenever he let his focus stray. No matter what his feelings toward his teacher were, or even what she might return, theirs was a master/student relationship first. He always had to respect that, no matter how often the line might have strayed - - or, he mused with a soft sigh, how far it might stray again.

Then, as he topped a familiar rise on the well-worn trail beneath his sandaled feet, he saw it and his heart skipped a beat. A plume of smoke rose out of the thick canopy ahead. Too thick to be a cookfire and too dark to be leaves and grass, it guttered into the clouds above. All other thoughts disappeared. Get to the Hall now!

Barnab ran like his life depended on it, but his life wasn't his concern. He bounded through the undergrowth, his vibroblade unsheathed and clearing the way as fast as he could swing. Meter after meter of dense green flew past as he made his way to what he prayed would be just another class in the Violet

Gallery. He ran breathlessly for the last kilometer, daring to hope that this was all a misunderstanding.

Those hopes were dashed the moment he entered the clearing. The spires of the Training Hall had been gutted by fire, its stained glass windows shattered and lying like discarded jewels on the blackened grounds. All around him, there was naught but destruction and death.

Clutching his humming blade, Barnab moved past more than a dozen shriveled bodies on the front steps of the hall. Their flesh withered and their bones shattered, their faces were contorted by terrible agony. He could not recognize them by what remained of their features, but their uniforms were all the identification he needed. They were fellow students, some in white and others in green. He didn't see their Masters on the steps, but he feared he would find them inside.

The doors to the Hall were lying in charred heaps in the entry chamber, and past them, his fears were confirmed. There, impaled on a spar of ch'hala wood from the Hall's gables, was the broken form of the Master in Green. His massive form, larger even than most Wookiees, was shriveled and wasted, most of his once rich brown fur now white and nearly translucent. The Master's rictus grin was unnerving, and Barnab found himself turning away in horror. What could have done this?

The massacre continued inside. More figures lay strewn down every hallway he could see. Steeling his will, the appalled governor headed into the charnel house. Determined to make his way to the Violet Gallery, he tried to empty his mind and not dwell on the carnage lying all around him. Walls streaked in blood, shattered doors lying in still-burning piles over charred bodies and shreds of colored clothing...

It was everything he could do to endure the stench and the stinging clouds of smoke, but he managed to navigate the sundered complex far enough to reach the Garden of Peace at its center. The sanctuary had been horribly violated, draped now in corpses instead of flowers and fragrant only in the foul odors of the dead.

He regretfully pushed the body of the fallen Master in Red out of the doorway he needed to use, wincing as bits of it fell off in the process. Whatever had done this hadn't just killed these people, Barnab thought. It drained them.

As he stepped into the hall over the red-shrouded body, he heard a sound up ahead -- the sound of combat! Someone was still alive! He moved more quickly, bolstered by hope, however vain it might be. He had to look away as he dashed through the White Gallery, disturbed that every other footstep was over or on top of a former student. He paused just long enough to pay a moment's final respect to the Master in White. Sprawled in the center of a ring of fallen pupils, he had obviously died fighting. They all had.

He couldn't dwell on that right now; the sound of battle kept him running. He turned his vibrosword off so the sound of it wouldn't give him away as he neared the cacophony ahead. He saw with growing dread that it was coming from inside the Violet Gallery, but that was a good sign as well. Fighting meant she might still be alive!

He did not have to open the door; it was already in smoldering flinders. He tucked and rolled, vaulting through the rent doorframe to keep from getting ambushed if anyone was waiting just inside it.

But there was no one there. All the conflict was near the heart of the room, on the woven Zabrak desert mat his Master used for duels and trials of advancement. He recalled, in the way that a mind wanders even in the most dire of moments, how much he feared standing in its center ring, and how often he'd left it in failure. He was a good student of K'thri, though certainly not the best.

No, the best was a teenaged Human woman who'd bested him every time they sparred. He saw her twisted body hanging from the rafters above him, a grimace of unspeakable pain on her once-pleasant face. If she could not stand against the force that assailed this place, what chance did he have?

On the mat, he saw the only thing that could give him hope in this dark hour. The Master in Violet was still alive, though she was bleeding heavily from the mouth and nose, and her stance showed that her left leg was at least sprained, if not broken. She was wielding something he'd given her as a gift months ago -- a long spar of metal from a distant asteroid, taken from the wreckage of a crashed starship. With a lengthy and expensive amount of work, he'd managed to get the shard of what some on Cularin had dubbed "songsteel" turned into a fighting staff for his Master. Now, it seemed to be the only thing saving her life.

Her foe was impossible to see clearly. Surrounded by shifting, impossibly deep shadows, it held aloft a similar weapon. Similar, but not at all the same once Barnab got a closer look at it. The staff it was swinging with devastating skill and speed was utterly black and difficult to look at. Every sense he had and several he'd never felt before screamed at him that the weapon was utterly wrong.

His Master had but seconds left to her; he could see her strength fading as the shadowy figure pressed its relentless assault. With no time to even cross the room and no chance of fighting that monstrosity, Barnab reached for something he'd hoped he would never have to use. It was a ranged weapon, and the Master in Violet would certainly scold him for using it -- assuming she lived to do so.

Barnab raised a small gray handgun at the living fiend of shadow and pulled its trigger. The weapon was an experimental device created nearly a year earlier to fight the Jedi Killer in Hedrett. It never saw use in that battle, but Barnab had always carried it just in case some other menace threatened his people. He had no idea how (or even if) it worked, but when facing certain death, any toss of the dice was a good one.

The gun made a high-pitched whine and jerked in his hand, discharging its tiny rocket with a plume of noxious smoke and a roar of flame. Both his Master and the figure turned to face him as it hurtled arrow-straight into the thing's shadowy body. Something within it must have been solid enough for the rocket to impact because there was a tremendous flash of light and the sound of an explosion.

Barnab didn't wait for his eyes to clear. He had already been running toward the Master in Violet, and by the time the missile detonated, he was crashing into her and knocking her to the ground. Several seconds slipped past as he tried to clear his head; the rocket's report had been both blinding and deafening.

When he could see again, the Master in Violet was slowly regaining her feet, leaning heavily on her staff. There was nothing where the shadow had been; no trace was left behind, its weapon gone. "Did..." he managed to gasp out, "... did I get it?"

The Master in Violet looked down at him with pain-filled, golden eyes. "No." Her voice was hard to make out; the thunder in his ears was still echoing. "It escaped." She pointed toward the far wall of the Gallery, where a huge smoking hole now led to the jungle outside. The trees visible near the hole were withering and dying, as if all the life was being torn from them by some dark hand.

Barnab staggered to his feet. "At least you're all right." He retrieved his blade and sheathed it as he reached out to touch her shoulder. "We need to get you out of here."

She nodded and placed her fingers on the back of his sword hand. "I think escape for both of us would be a wise idea." Her voice was halting and slightly choked; from the look of her chest, she was likely suffering from broken ribs. "And I would not be so quick to lower your sword."

Barnab blinked and looked at her. "Do you think it will return?"

She shook her head and raised her staff in a defensive posture. "No, dear one. I am not concerned with the foe that just departed."

"Then what, Master?" He drew his vibroblade and thumbed its activation switch.

"I am more concerned with the foes it has left in its wake."

Even as she spoke, even as he turned to stand at her side, the fallen students in the Violet Gallery began to twitch and rise. Empty eyes stared into the void as they regained their feet. From above, a dead woman fell from the rafters and stood back up, bones breaking even as she reached forward, fingers hooked like the claws of a beast.

"But - - but how? How is this possible?" Barnab gaped in horror as the bodies of his friends and classmates stalked slowly toward them.

The Master in Violet spun her staff and brought it down to point at the closest one. "Question later. Fight now."